Professionalize Sudanese Teachers' Conception of Work through Action Research

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Abstract

Teacher action research is in the emergent stages in Sudanese schools and needs to be well disseminated and actively supported from the Ministry of education. Although the teacher-as-researcher movement has been in existence for some twenty years, there is a reason to think that the majority if not all, of Sudanese class teachers remain uninvolved. What lies behind their reluctance? This paper looks at the complexities in the role of a teacher engaging in action research. This includes the need to explore further the principles and practice of action research. This study puts forward explanations in four main areas: teachers' perception of action research; teachers' professional status, teachers' confidence, and teachers' difficulty engaging in action research. For this purpose a workshop was held and representatives from seven Universities and 25 school teachers participated in a thorough discussion and further investigation was carried out based on the workshop discussion. The data was analyzed statistically and the results showed that the Sudanese teachers have no idea about action research it is not part of their culture as well as the institutions culture. Teachers are reluctant to do an action research and that due to the lack of knowledge which was an important factor. Teachers are not certain about the adequacy of doing an action research. There are other factors such as time and the over load. Based on these findings recommendations are drawn, it is suggested that classroom teaching is an all-demanding and all-involving task which is excluding of an activity as exacting as research. However, it is argued that with appropriate support more teachers may become involved in an action research.

Keywords: Action research, Sudanese language teachers

1. Introduction

Over the last eight months, in collaboration with my colleagues, in TESOL Sudan (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), and ASTEL(Association of Sudanese Teachers of English Language) we have been developing ways to enhance teachers' professional in the context of a monthly forums and workshops for teachers with little or no substantial prior teaching experience. The intervention we have devised among others – a small-scale action research. We want to encourage teachers to share their experiences and, by this means, to give a degree of publicity to the professional thinking that informs practice. We believe that sharing ideas with colleagues, and keeping the public well informed about professional concerns and endeavours, may contribute to raising the self-confidence of teachers as a professional group and, thereby, to improving both performance and professional satisfaction. We intend to stimulate teachers as a group to professionalize their concept of work, in particular by taking control of the development of schools, and of the identification and resolution of crucial professional problems. The current period of rapid social change (while challenging stability) offers exciting possibilities for the educational system to build a more dynamic culture of teaching and learning in schools. This implies a need, however, for teachers and heads individually and collaboratively to reflect upon their practice, analyze the functioning of their institution and its strengths and weaknesses, develop perspectives for the future, translate them into actions and structures, and monitor their impact on real situations. A brief narrative description of the journal article, document, or resource.Action research has received increasing attention, especially by school leaders. It is also perceived as a means for teacher professional development and professionalism as is not provided by the teachers training institutes. TESOL which has its own brand of action research called "action research interest group", is in support of such a view. Action research projects are not, however, without problems. In this paper, structures that pose constraints to successful action research endeavors will be the main focus for discussion.

2. The rational of the study

Ellis (1997: 22) asserts that 'Teachers should become more than consumers of Theories and research; they should become researchers and theorists in their own right'. Teachers can become researchers; and indeed, action research

is the process that empowers, rewards, and it is a successful way in improving classroom practice it is the driver of teacher professional identity. And better quality teaching and learning has long been recognized internationally Lankshear & Knobel, (2004); Lewin, (1946); Stenhouse, (1975), it is a concept and practice that is relatively new for Sudanese primary and secondary school teachers.

3. The research questions

The aim of this study was to answer the following questions the following questions were addressed:

1- How do teachers in Sudan perceive action research?

2- Why do Sudanese teachers reluctant to action research?

4. The hypotheses

This article reviews four hypotheses that have been put forward. And offered explanations in four main areas: teachers' professional knowledge and status; the teachers' perception of action research; teachers' confidence; and teachers' difficulties engaging in action research.

5. Apparatus

A workshop is organized by TESOL Sudan and ASTEL as the two organizations work in collaboration to organize the monthly English forum. Two papers about action research were presented those papers used as basic materials for discussing the four main areas: teachers' professional knowledge and status; teachers' working conditions; teachers' confidence; and teachers' difficulty engaging with outsider's research methodologies. The participants who are members of TESOL and ASTEL are divided into seven groups of five. The results of the discussion were analyzed and presented in this paper. Also a survey was conducted to have an idea about the teacher training programmes and the status of the action research in those programmes.

6. What is action research?

Action research is undertaken in a school setting. It is a reflective process that allows for inquiry and discussion as components of the "research." Often, action research is a collaborative activity among colleagues searching for solutions to everyday, real problems experienced in schools, or looking for ways to improve instruction and increase student achievement. Rather than dealing with the theoretical, action research allows practitioners to address those concerns that are closest to them, ones over which they can exhibit some influence and make change. Practitioners are responsible for making more and more decisions in the operations of schools, and they are being held publicly accountable for student achievement results. The process of action research assists educators in assessing needs, documenting the steps of inquiry, analyzing data, and making informed decisions that can lead to desired outcomes.

7. Teacher training in Sudan

Most reports on Sudan education indicate that the majority of teachers have not yet been sufficiently equipped to meet the education needs of the growing demands in the 21st century global environment. The ministry of Education Initiative research project (1999) concluded that the most critical challenge for teacher education in Sudan was the limited conceptual knowledge of many teachers. This includes poor grasp of their subjects as evidenced by a range of factual errors made in content and concepts during lessons. Many teachers' poor conceptual and content knowledge contributes to low levels of learner achievement. Previous to the educational reform of 1991 there were five modes of teacher training yet none of them adopting action research as one of the effective tools of developing teachers' professional. Action research was introduced as a case study by a PhD candidate Paul Fean he asserts "In this paper I have briefly introduced the nature and context of university-level ELT in Sudan, as effective professional development of teachers must be located within their realities of their practice. The role of teachers' 'living theories' in their practice was discussed, in order to highlight the importance of engaging with these views in professional development programmes. I then outlined and critiqued the forms of professional development currently available in Sudan, calling for a strategically planned approach to training, which is needs-led, contextually relevant and includes follow-up monitoring and support. Finally, I introduced action research as a model which could guide the development of a contextually relevant ongoing in-service teacher development, which is vital to improving quality of education provision in Sudanese universities." Paul Fean(2009).

8. Models of teacher training in Sudan

Teacher training was mainly in-service training.

8.1 Bakht er Ruda Model:

Teachers (who are secondary school leavers) teach for a minimum of 2 years before they go for their initial training. They were fully released for the training which took one academic year. Beside English, they were trained on two more subjects.

8.2 SETI Model (Sudan English Training institute)

This is an in-service training course. The trainees did not leave their schools. They have their modules of training and assignments. Their field tutors visited them on regular basis. They used to meet twice a week in their institutes to discuss the modules and assignments. This training used to last for 3 academic years. They also had some programmes in the summer holidays.

8.3 The Consecutive Model

The trainees worked in their schools for all of the academic year. For three successive years, they spent the summer holidays (4 months) in the training institutes.

8.4 SELTI Model (Sudan English Language Institute)

SELTI trains experienced teachers. Its model rests on the reflective model which capitalizes on both sides of the coin: experiential knowledge and received knowledge. It combines the two elements through cycle of reflection-on-action that would lead to the betterment of performance and keeps professional development on the move. The student teachers spend about 10 weeks in a language upgrading programme followed by study of methodologies of teaching the skills (and an introduction to linguistic in the case of secondary level). The final part of the course is practical studies which involves lesson planning and teaching practice.

8.5 Educational Ladder and Training institutes

At the beginning of the 1990s, two great changes took place in the system of education:

(1)The educational ladder was changed form a 3-stage system to a 2-stage system (Basic Level and Secondary), which resulted in canceling the intermediate level and reduced the years of general education to 11years.

(2)The Ministry of Education stopped the training institutes that used to Train the intermediate level teachers such as Bakht er Ruda and ISETI.

Accordingly, there was a radical change in the population of English language teachers. The teachers of English language:

(1) Had no experience of teaching English.

(2) Had no training on teaching English.

(3) Their command of the language is not so strong.

The profiles kept changing. There is no doubt about that; but it leaves us with a plethora of question to ponder about: Did that have an impact on the English language education?

9. Discussion

9.1 Teachers' perceptions of action research

Overall, the responses from the sample of (35) teachers of English indicated that their conceptions of research are aligned with conventional scientific notions of enquiry. Key ideas which resonated with teachers' notions of research were statistics, objectivity, hypotheses, large samples, and variables yet they failed to relate it to profession development. Teachers, though, also rated low the need for research to provide results they could use. As McIntyre (2005) argues, teaching is a fundamentally practical activity and in evaluating research evidence teachers will naturally look for ideas that enhance pedagogy and not just propositional knowledge. There was less certainty among these teachers about need for results to be generalizable or for them to be made public. The former is not an essential characteristic of educational research, especially in the sense of statistical generalizability, and an awareness of the value of rigorous but context-specific inquiries would seem desirable in enabling teachers to think about research in more inclusive ways and hence to have more realistic goals about the scope of their research.

This study has also identified a number of reasons why teachers said they do not do research. A lack of knowledge was an important factor; it refers to teachers' concerns about their lack of knowledge about research, while Henson (1996) suggests that teachers' perceived lack of knowledge about research means they have limited confidence in their ability to do research.

9.2 Challenges encounter teacher in engaging in action

The teachers who reported never doing research were similarly asked to indicate reasons for this. Their responses are summarized. The overwhelming factor (cited by 81.7 per cent of the group) was the lack of time it was no surprise to learn that time and workload was major constraints for the teacher-researchers.. Teachers who were on the Ministry Contract, there were concerns about 'falling behind' in other areas if time was taken to do research.

Other important factor is that the teachers had been unable to disseminate their findings beyond their own school and it was clear that not having access to a wider audience of some kind was constraining and frustrating for them. It is important that if we are to take seriously the business of creating an environment which will nurture teacher research then there must be places where the voices of teacher researchers can be seen and heard, beyond their own school gates or could be linked with promotion.

10. Conclusion

The literature is replete with persuasive arguments in favor of the benefits to teachers of being research-engaged; the reality remains though that teacher research—systematic, rigorous enquiry by teachers into their own professional contexts, and which is made public—is a minority activity in ELT. This is not a criticism of teachers, as there are clearly powerful interacting factors at play in shaping the current situation. These factors have typically been described largely with reference to teachers' unfavorable working conditions. However, this study shows that barriers also exist which are attitudinal, conceptual, and procedural in nature. Thus, one common issue to emerge from the sample in this study is that teachers' understandings of what research is are not aligned with the forms of systematic inquiry which they can feasibly and productively engage in. Teachers may thus have inappropriate or unrealistic notions of the kind of inquiry teacher research involves. This has obvious implications for the need for awareness-raising work with teachers and through which their perspectives on research can be reviewed. Additionally, teachers may lack both the knowledge and practical skills which must underpin good quality research. These limitations in teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and skills (particularly when combined with unsupportive institutional conditions) shed light on why for so many teachers doing research are not seen to be feasible or even desirable activities. Productive teacher research engagement, then, is unlikely to occur without the organizational, collegial, emotional, intellectual, and practical support structures which are needed not only to initiate it but also more importantly to sustain it and enhance its quality.

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